

Cassava information centre

Susana Amaya reports from Colombia on the building of a unique collection of data



Photo: CIAT

CIAT, the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture in Palmira, Colombia, was created in 1967 as part of what is now a global network of nine international centres promoting the development of agriculture and livestock raising.

An important aspect of CIAT's operations has always been its library services, and from the beginning the Centre's librarian, Fernando Monge, was concerned that the documentation collected should not become "a mere collection to be consulted by experts." So he hit upon the idea of expanding the library's services through use of a "peek-a-boo" punch card system. This is a relatively simple and inexpensive system in which a subject is broken down into keywords, a card is punched for each, and this then provides an instant visual indication of specific references available when placed over a punched master card on a backlit screen.

At the same time as Monge was developing his information system, a research program on cassava was being developed (one of six programs in which CIAT is involved) with the sponsorship of the IDRC. This required the publication of a bibliography similar to those produced for rice and corn at centres in Mexico and the Philippines. In 1972 CIAT and IDRC agreed to cooperate in developing an information project – the Cassava Information Centre.

The project was conceived as an integrated documentation service comprising bibliographic compilation, continuing information to subscribers and selective search capability. As a basic requirement for this system it was necessary to prepare a glossary on cassava based on the keywords used in CIAT's cassava program. This accomplished, the punch cards were then revised and up-dated for consistency.

Another major undertaking in the early stages was the collection of existing documentation on cassava at the world level. Literature on cassava is sporadic and scattered in numerous publications in many countries. Nonetheless, by October 1975 the centre had completed the acquisition of an estimated 90 percent of all the important documentation on the subject.

The management of this unique collection of data calls for a methodical approach. Documents are first consecutively numbered, catalogued and matched with their

authors' resumes. Then comes the crucial point in the process – the allocation of keywords. Crucial because it is through them that it will be possible to retrieve the document according to specific subjects or a user's special field of interest. Consequently it is the centre's policy to use too many keywords rather than too few. The keywords are added to the "peek-a-boo" system and a typed summary card is prepared for each new document, reduced, printed and distributed to subscribers, who may order a copy of the document or retain the card for reference.

As of October some 2,600 articles had been processed and a bibliography containing some 2,000 references was close to publication. The centre has 450 direct subscribers, and a considerably larger number of indirect users. In addition the centre provides a data search service in response to enquiries for information on specific topics. For the future it is hoped to continue building the data base, while simultaneously expanding the editorial aspect of the centre's work to include the publication of a periodic cassava information bulletin and a manual on diseases, pests and deficiencies affecting cassava.

The cassava information centre is one of several specialized centres that will form part of the worldwide AGRIS information network, also supported by the IDRC. It is just part of the overall capacity of CIAT's documentation centre, which also covers animal sciences, beans, and Latin American agricultural economics.

Fernando Monge believes the work is vital. Researchers currently produce a large amount of information that is never published in the conventional media, he says. "I believe I do not exaggerate in saying that perhaps not even one percent of the information produced by research is disseminated by conventional publication media," Monge told the International Association of Agricultural Librarians and Documentalists in Mexico City earlier this year.

"Documentation centres and libraries must seek information where it is generated as it is generated, and develop appropriate systems to achieve immediate dissemination to the scientific community. . . . The modern documentalist's function is to tell the expert: this is of interest to you."